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A deal to think about

The administration has wisely postponed the moment of decision on whether to sell Iran seven AWACS planes. These are modified Boeing 707s equipped with highly sophisticated electronic gear to serve as flying command centers in aerial warfare. The equipment includes look-down radar to detect low-flying aircraft, and computers to sort out data. Iran seeks the advanced system to guard its long and vulnerable border with the Soviet Union.

President Carter, until he drew back the other day, was on a collision course with Congress over the deal with Iran, which would amount to \$3 billion when supporting facilities are added to the \$1.2 billion cost of the planes. Postponement and possible avoidance of the confrontation made sense because the President, rebuffed in a House committee and headed for similar treatment in the Senate committee, might have incurred a humiliating defeat at a time when he is trying to smooth out his relations with the legislators. Congress has a veto power over such arms sales.

The delay of the showdown involves the temporary withdrawal of the administration's official notification of the proposed sale. The matter is to be resubmitted to Congress after the August recess, when there will be more time for debate.

Besides easing pressure on a sore point in administration-congressional relations, a less hurried consideration of the Iranian deal will permit a further examination of security objections to putting AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) at the shah's disposal. These concerns have not been resolved to congressional satisfaction, and there still may be some doubts in administration circles as well.

According to sources quoted by The Star's Vernon Guidry, CIA Director Stansfield Turner has been worried about a "major effort" by the Soviet Union to obtain an intact AWACS plane with its treasure of secret technology by inducing an Iranian defection. The chance of this happening could be estimated as negligible, or the potential damage limited by the way the Iranian AWACS models are equipped, but some congressmen are on firm ground in seeking reassurance on this score.

It does not solve the problem to note that Russian spies will also have a crack at obtaining even more advanced AWACS secrets when the planes are operating under NATO auspices. Our NATO allies have a more extensive track record and are several times more practiced than the Iranians in such affairs. And while the United States has had a fairly steadfast friendship with the shah's government, that authoritarian regime could be subject to future instability, with matching effects on the safety of our military secrets in Iranian care.

The timing of the proposed Iranian transaction, besides, allows an extended look at the implications. The first of the planes in question were not to be delivered until 1981. A few weeks of extra caution are in order.